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ABSTRACT

In his remarks delivered at the Second National Symposium on Children and Television, Federal Communications Commissioner Nicholas Johnson charges that television is not adequately serving those 20 million Americans under the age of five. He scores the networks for the inane, if not actually harmful, nature of their programming and for the quantity and subject matter of commercials. Action for Children's Television (ACT), he points out, has succeeded in bringing these failures to public attention and in causing at least a temporary effort on the part of the networks to improve some of the programming aimed at children. However, he continues, the commercials aimed at children continue to glorify such non-nutritional items as candy and sweet snacks and the cartoon programs continue to portray violence as having a harmless effect. Commissioner Johnson lauds the efforts of the Children's Television Workshop and of Fred Rogers, but, he insists, it remains for the general public to maintain constant pressure on the networks to improve. He suggests such vigilance could be aided by a separate institute to evaluate the total programming performance of the broadcast industry, especially in the areas of its treatment of violence, its impact on the minorities, its journalistic performance, service to the community, and the effect of its advertising policy. (JY)

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Remarks of Commissioner Nicholas Johnson, Federal Communications Commission, Prepared for Delivery to the Second National Symposium on Children and Television, Co-Sponsored by Action for Children's Television and the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Public Information, Palmer House Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, October 18, 1971, 1:00 P.M.

R_x FOR CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

> We feel it is essential that commercial broadcasters recognize their responsibility to program for the child audience. . . . We urge that at least half of all prime time be especially constructed with the best interests of children in mind.
>
> -- The American Academy of Pediatrics

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Americans in every walk of life are today reexamining their own professional and personal lives. As a society, we have more education, more income and more leisure than ever before. And a great many of us are using this opportunity to reevaluate where we are--individually and as a nation--and where we would like to go.

The best young law school graduates used to accept jobs with big corporate law firms with the same enthusiasm and pride they displayed as undergraduates when accepting their Phi Beta Kappa keys. Few questioned the propriety of using their lives in such ways.

Recently, some of the graduating classes of our great law schools have sent none of their top graduates to such firms. Ralph Nader, and other public interest law firms, are overwhelmed with applicants. The largest firms are confronting demands from their new employees that young lawyers be given time to use their talents in public interest causes--often attacking the very kinds of corporations the firm normally would be defending.

Similar pressures are felt within professional groups of scientists, engineers and architects. Moreover, customers are more willing to complain--and to organize to get results when no relief is forthcoming. Blacks have forced all of us to rethink the ugly questions of prejudice and poverty. Women have brought into the open the indignities they endure in a male-dominated society. Students make us think about educational reform. And prisoners are trying to get us to focus on criminal justice in America.

You pediatricians are a proud and commendable part of this great movement, this pressure for new thinking, for humanitarian values, for a rising level of awareness. You

who are giving your lives to making the most of our children are beginning to look beyond the walls of your clinics and offices.

Many psychiatrists now believe that patient-by-patient counseling is not enough; that it is, indeed, as hopeless a solution as bailing a sinking boat with no bottom. They point to stresses and pressures in our society that must be acknowledged by their profession, and treated on a nation-wide basis, if psychiatrists are to hope to have a meaningful impact upon the frustration, depression, mental illness, and neuroses that seem to be mounting day by day.

You, too, are looking for the widespread influences upon all children--not just the symptoms of the individual child in your office at the moment.

And you, like most thoughtful observers of the American scene, have ultimately come back to television and its influence.

You are concerned, as you should be, about the impact of television commercials and programming upon children. But it may help you to see that influence better if you can see it in perspective, as but a small part of the havoc being wrought by the glass screen.

When the Kerner Commission set out to study the worsening state of race relations in America it ended up devoting a full chapter to the implications of the mass media. After

the assassinations of Senator Robert F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King the Eisenhower Commission investigated the causes of violence in this country. It ended up devoting two full volumes of staff studies to its findings regarding violence in the media. The women's liberation movement cites television as one of the most potent forces for demeaning women. Senator Nelson recently held hearings on the impact of television drug advertising upon the drug problem. The list goes on and on.

You are concerned that television is not adequately serving, say, those 20 million Americans under the age of five. I think you're right. But in understanding the reasons for television's failure it's useful to note that television isn't just picking on kids.

We have seen the documentation of its failures to serve those more than 20 million black Americans. Television does very little about, or specifically for, those 20 million Americans over the age of 65 either. Or the nearly 30 million blue collar workers. Or the nearly 60 million students. Or the more than 100 million women.

Television is, in short, failing each of us individually in its effort to attract all of us as a mass. This comes about, in part, because the television industry is not even concerned about programming. It is not in the business of selling programs to viewers; it is in the business of selling

viewers to advertisers. It is a three billion dollar-a-year attention-getting device. There is much less there than meets the eye.

Television is the searchlight at the supermarket opening; the flashing neon around the billboard; the topless dancer at the nightclub. Television is the candy the child molester gives your kid. The whole purpose of the enterprise is to hold the attention of the audience long enough for it to be exposed to the commercial. The audience is spoken of in terms of "cost per thousand." In order to avoid nation-wide revolt the industry engages in tokenism--token black employees, token news and public affairs, and token children's programs. But nobody is fooled. As Mason Williams says, "Artistically television starts at the bottom and spreads out." Every year we exclaim that the new prime time season couldn't possibly be worse. And then, the following fall, we are always proved wrong.

I do not say these things about television in an effort to put down those within the industry. There are at least some talented and frustrated souls in television who have glimpsed the medium's potential--and responsibility--and are desperately trying to improve its response. But I do think you ought to know something about the nature of the beast whose leg you're biting, and realize that children are not its only victims.

There is no point in underemphasizing the power and determination of the television industry. But it is also foolish to think it incapable of citizen reform. I wonder if you realize what a powerful force Action for Children's Television and similar groups have become? Two years ago, children were considered by network profit and loss men as nothing more than another audience to be captured in the cheapest way possible and exploited to the fullest by its delivery to advertisers.

In 1961 Newton Minow, now of Chicago, but then Chairman of the FCC, said to a gathering of broadcasters:

> It used to be said that there were three great influences on a child: home, school and church. Today there is a fourth great influence and you ladies and gentlemen control it. . . . What about your responsibilities? Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacity of our children? Is there no room for a children's news show explaining something about the world to them at their level of understanding? Is there no room for reading the great literature of the past, teaching them the great traditions of freedom?

There was a limited response from broadcasters in an effort to deflect public criticism. But certainly 1970 witnessed a return to "normalcy."

Then came the ACT petition, and things have not been the same since.

. The FCC proposed rules to improve children's TV.

. A special FCC children's unit was established.

. FCC Chairman Burch has spoken out on the subject.

. Concerned citizens sent 60,000 letters to the FCC.

. Broadcasters at least offer promises of reform.

. The FTC is holding hearings on the impact of broadcast advertising, especially on children.

There are other events one could point to--the tremendous work that is being done by Children's Television Workshop, Mr. Rogers, and others in public broadcasting who continue to outshine the prosperous commercial networks to their embarrassment and, I think, shame. There has been some good staff work done for the Surgeon General's NIMH panel studying television violence.

Such events represent evidence of your impact, of which you can be proud, and for which all Americans can be grateful. But there is a difference between progress, or potential, and final results. And we must not be fooled about that. How often have we seen the "reform syndrome"--a problem is identified, the public becomes concerned, elected and appointed government representatives are urged to act, a study is begun, or an agency is created, or a proceeding is begun, and then time passes. There even may be evidence of a little reform for awhile. But interest lags--

except for the representation of the special interest groups hurt by reform. And modest progress, won so slowly at such great cost, is quickly lost.

Moreover, let us assume for a moment we agree that the networks' treatment of our children is a scandal, and that we had the power to effect lasting change. All right. Now what, precisely, would we like to change, and how, and why, and is it politically and economically feasible?

What really bothers you most about the commercials and programs? The number of commercials? The products sold? The way in which they are sold? The content of the programs? The violence? The lack of substantive information? A bias? Their scheduling? The total quantity? Too much or too lit le?

The matter of greatest economic and political concern to the networks is, obviously, the revenue generated by the commercials on the children's programs. If you are not concerned about the commercials your negotiation with the networks and the FCC about the quantity and content of children's programming will be eased considerably.

But programming content is an area that government ought to be extremely reluctant to enter--and one that anyone will quickly find is a quagmire. How does one measure the "quality" of a children's program? And if the judgment is only subjective would even those of us here agree on which programs we would, and would not, permit?

Do you want to forbid the showing of any violence? Or are you simply concerned that it be shown realistically, rather than as painless fun? Or, on the other hand, would children be unfavorably affected by such realism? What if the problem is that those who write children's programs are devoid of the imagination and creativity necessary to write interesting material that does not contain violence? If that is the case, when the violence is removed the program that remains is even more vapid and mind-rotting than it was before. Maybe the solution is to train better writers.

What is our concern about commercials? I have suggested we ought to at least limit the networks to no more commercial minutes per program hour on Saturday morning than they use on the prime time evening programming for adults. That might help. But would it make enough of a difference to matter? Such limitations do not affect the content of the commercials one wit.

ACT has proposed the elimination of commercials entirely from children's programming. That also would help. But most of the programs children watch are not "children's programs." If we are really trying to save children from exposure to the televised hard sell the ACT proposal isn't enough either.

Moreover, any reduction (or elimination) of commercial time does reduce networks' revenues. Of course, the networks

can afford a cut in revenues--as can a great many other industries. Of course, they are not investing as much revenue in quality programming as they could--and should. Reducing their profits may be a useful way of getting their attention. Many outraged parents may view it as just retribution for years of accumulated sins. But it is a remedy that has little to do with improving programming--and may even produce the opposite result.

Can we affect the content of the commercials? Could we ban some products--like over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, and mood-altering drugs--being advertised at all during hours when children are likely to be watching?

I have proposed the idea of substituting "institutional" advertising for product advertising. For example, General Foods would use its commercial time to sell children on the sterling moral quality of the corporation, rather than the energy levels of its latest sugar-frosted, multi-colored breakfast cereal. That's not a total solution either. Moreover, the public television people--who are now the beneficiaries of those institutional advertising budgets (or "grants," as they like to call them)--are worried such a proposal would just shift funds from public to commercial broadcasting.

that because the questions are difficult we ought to throw up our hands and walk away. We just work harder at finding answers. But I don't think we should fool ourselves that knee-jerk, simplistic proposals will carry the day.

I can't know what problems concern you most. But let's look at some of the problems I would imagine pediatricians would be concerned with, and see how those problems relate to television.

What does television teach about nutrition? Do children respond to the food advertising they see? Are these foods good for them? What nutritional information should they be taught? Is good nutritional practice and education made more difficult by television advertising, and the lack of programs on sound nutrition? Once you analyze these questions and the issues they raise,

I have also suggested that advertising on television be "factual and informative," rather than engaging in emotional appeals. "Factual and informative" is not a precise standard to apply, but it is no more difficult than "false and misleading" (the standard the Federal Trade Commission now applies to advertising). If the content of television commercials is having an adverse impact upon the American people, why just take an ineffective stab at saving the children?

Maybe FCC Chairman Burch is right. Maybe the tampering with any of the details of the commercial broadcasting system requires that we at least address the major premises of that system, and the logical extensions of our arguments.

Perhaps, rather than encouraging commercial broadcasting to do more and better children's programming, we ought to recognize the inherent conflict between merchandising and children's entertainment and education and forbid the networks to do <u>any</u> children's programming. Maybe someone else should prepare the programs, not at the networks' expense, and run them on commercial television (without commercials)--or only on public television.

Such questions, and options, give us some sense of the complexity of the task we've undertaken--and they are in no sense more than illustrative. I am not one to suggest

I think you can conclude that commercial television is a nutritional disaster for children, fostering positively harmful nutritional habits, and ill-preparing children for the basic human activity of eating properly. How does this happen?

A few weeks ago a major network ran two children's programs during prime time. I suspect the network was very proud of them, and no doubt should be--they were reruns of Dr. Seuss and Peanuts cartoons--which children find delightful. But the advertisements for the programs included, in the Dr. Seuss' cartoon, one for a major cola, and another for cookie snacks. The cookie ads were done in cartoon form with rhyming dialogue--a technique indistinguishable from the format of the Dr. Seuss' cartoon. Now how are children supposed to separate the cartoon characters of Dr. Seuss from the pitch for snack products? The Peanuts' ads were no better. Cake snacks were being sold as the way of dealing with the daily "zaps" of life. And who is on the packaging of the snacks? Charlie Brown, and other Peanuts characters.

Others have commented on the reasons for the extent of malnutrition at all income levels in our society. Dr. George Briggs, professor of nutrition at Berkeley and Executive Editor of Nutrition Education, in a widely reported speech last August, estimated the national costs of malnutrition at $30 billion a year. He noted:

> We can call our nation's eating habits terrible. . . . Look at Saturday morning T.V. commercials to get an understanding of factors in food motivation.

Robert Choate has testified:

> Our children are deliberately being sold the sponsor's less nutritious products; are being programmed to demand sugar and sweetness in every food; and are being counter-educated away from nutrition knowledge by being sold products on a non-nutritive basis.

The ACT study of commercial children's television in Boston found that 80 percent of all children's commercials were toys, cereals, candy and sweets and other food snacks.

What about the food buying habits of those with truly limited resources? Isn't it senseless for government to attempt to provide funds to the poor at the same time its licensed trustees tell them to use the money to buy nutritionally worthless products? Mr. Choate, in his presentation to the National Association of Broadcasters Television Code Review Board, quoted the Executive Director of Inwood House in New York City:

> The welfare dollar oftens goes for snacks, sodas, sweets and all other highly advertised edibles. It seems that in some low income homes, the only programs that are watched are those advertising food. These advertisements are doubly offensive if they lead young mothers and children away from good nutrition to waste their money on questionable products.

What possible justification exists for this systematic exploitation of children and their families? You are familiar with the maxim "Primum non nocere"--"First do no harm"--an elemental standard in the consideration of medical treatment. But this is a minimal standard, and even it is clearly not being followed in commercial television.

A similar analysis applies to other issues of concern to pediatricians. Children learn very little about safety from commercial television. What is the result of children seeing cartoons, reruns, and regular programs in which characters are flattened by cars, shot with guns, run through grinders, and "injured" in a variety of ways with no apparent pain or injury?

Richard Tobin wrote recently in Saturday Review:

> A few weekends ago we sat once again in front of a TV set (again at times when children would be apt to tune in) and discovered that little if anything had changed. Murders, tortures, gougings, whippings, brutality of every conceivable sort marched endlessly across the bloody screen. In more than two-thirds of the segments some form of gun or rifle was used or at least displayed menacingly. The catalogue of violence recorded in June 1968 was still approximately the same in September 1971 in spite of all of the fine talk.

I wonder if a child's vision of these human experiences is really the vision their parents would want them to have, or that you doctors would try to foster.

As for preventive medicine, commercial television is simply teaching that popping pills or chemicals will assure

health, happiness and success to all. Every man can be his own pharmacist; and doctors don't even come into the picture very much.

Tom Houser was a Republican Nixon appointee to the FCC and a valued colleague. He was, perhaps, the highest quality appointee of this Administration to the regulatory commissions, or to any other position. Having experimented with a quality appointment, however, the President chose not to reappoint Tom, and he is now practicing law with Newt Minow here in Chicago. Before he left he spoke of his concern for the impact of television on children:

> Many of us are concerned that children are learning that satisfaction comes not from activity, but the passive possession and consumption of things, not from listening, thinking or understanding; these phony portrayals of life inhibit children from developing their own unique and individual self.

I share his concern. The Congress has recently considered the establishment of a new program in child development by the Federal government. Can't commercial television be induced to start contributing to child development education, not only for children but for parents as well?

John Charles Condry, a developmental psychologist at Cornell University, filed comments in the Commission's

rule making on children's television. In discussing television, and what it might have become he said:

> What are we to say to future generations when they grow older and look back on their childhood? Are we to admit that with an opportunity to teach, inform, delight and entertain unparalleled in the history of man we choose to fill their minds with pap? Are we to say that the short term gain of a few selected businesses was more important than the intellectual development of an entire nation of children? Are we to admit that knowing better and having the resources and ability we lacked the will? God help us if this is our answer, because it is the response of a civilization careless and contemptuous of its future. It is the response of a society too weak and witless to survive.

It is not difficult to get discouraged. But consider some of the changes that have occurred.

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of the Children's Television Workshop, with Sesame Street and The Electric Company. It is important to have a benchmark and standard in any endeavor, although it is tragic, in this instance, that it was not forthcoming from the richly-endowed commercial networks. Action for Children's Television has really begun to turn the country around on the issues of children and broadcasting. Fred Rogers is surely the first in his "neighborhood"; he has been a great advocate for the public interest, as well as a regular practitioner. The networks have made some changes in their programming. NBC has Take a Giant Step and Barrier Reef as well as several children's specials: A Picture of U. S., The Flower Boxes, The Blue Edge, and All About Me. ABC has

Curiosity Shop and Make a Wish. CBS has presented In the News and You are There, as well as its Children's Film Classics and a number of specials. CBS summed it up in its comments to the Commission:

> . . . [T]he Commission's initiative in this area has prompted great efforts by the entire broadcast industry in order to further improve (and provide additional) quality programming for children. To the extent it has prompted self-analysis, this proceeding may result in better service to the public.

Congratulations ACT; I think CBS is right. It is also important to recognize the efforts of numerous local groups. Parents everywhere are thinking about children's programming, meeting with station managers and program producers, and trying to develop programming that will serve the needs of parents and children alike.

The activities of you pediatricians, carried on by your Academy's Committee on Public Information, could serve as a model for other professional groups. The Mister Rogers' Neighborhood special program on going to a hospital, and the six programs on children's health, produced with WMAQ-TV, the NBC station here in Chicago, are examples of the positive uses of television. I congratulate you on these activities, and urge you to expand them across the country.

The picture I have tried to describe to you is mixed: a general condemnation of the recent past in children's

programming, some hope for future progress, and a fairly pessimistic outlook for lasting change--unless those who seek change double and redouble their efforts. Unfortunately, special interests have a way of outlasting the memories of those who seek and promise change.

In its section on mass media, the 1970 White House Conference on Children opened with a quotation from the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, and went on to say:

> By 1970 these demands [for high quality programming] remain unmet. . . . [R]eal improvement has yet to appear on the television screen.

The 1970 Conference made a number of recommendations, including some to the FCC, and proposed the establishment of a National Children's Media Foundation. Based on the reaction so far from the White House I don't expect them to have much impact. I mentioned earlier the establishment in the FCC of a special children's unit. What I neglected to tell you is that this "unit" consists of but two people, that its only mission is to "study" the problem, and that even this minimal effort could only be launched by Chairman Burch with a four-to-three vote of support from his Commission!

I once recommended the establishment of a separate institute to evaluate the total programming performance of the

broadcast industry--violence, the impact on minorities, its journalistic performance, service to community, and the effect of advertising. Others have made similar recommendations. There has been no progress in that area, other than the excellent annual Columbia-DuPont report. We will soon see whether the Department of Health, Education and Welfare can make a contribution, when the Surgeon General's report on violence is issued, but it will always suffer from the networks' blackballing of panel membership--at the Administration's invitation.

You recommended the establishment of a multi-disciplinary commission to concern itself with broadcast programming. Private professional groups have a very significant role to play. Suppose you could confront the FCC, the Federal Trade Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Congress, and the broadcasting industry with your yearly evaluation of all television commercials and programming by the networks. Suppose you were joined by other professional groups concerned with child development--not simply by signing petitions and filing short comments, but with full professional studies, analyses of programs, recommendations, and expertise on the entire communications industry and sub-government. And suppose in addition to working "upward" toward the industry and government, you work "downward" in your dealings with individual

children and parents, sensitizing them to the problems caused by the present performance of television. Couldn't we then begin to build a force for lasting change?

Sometimes, in my more cynical moments, I am afraid that the broadcast industry believes it can defuse the concerns of ACT, and the others who are seeking change in television, with a little improvement and a lot of publicity--and that in time things will, as they have in the past, return to "normal." The consumer movement must now confront the problem of sustaining its impact. It will happen only if groups like yours aggressively act where your special talents have the most useful impact. I can think of no area where this is more true than in appraising, and changing, the performance of commercial television as it affects children.

Senator Ted Kennedy once said of his brother Robert, he "saw wrong and tried to right it." I can offer you no higher praise.

> It is as if in our schools and colleges we were to allow business interests to determine the subjects to be taught and the content of these courses, with the choice based solely on their popularity among the least mature students--and with classwork interrupted every 15 minutes for a commercial.
>
> --Dr. Benjamin Spock